

## Town Meeting Places

By TONY KELSO

This annual Town Meeting at the new Performing Arts Center will be historic for several reasons. By my count it will be the eighth official place where Duxbury voters have gathered to vote matters of the town since 1637.

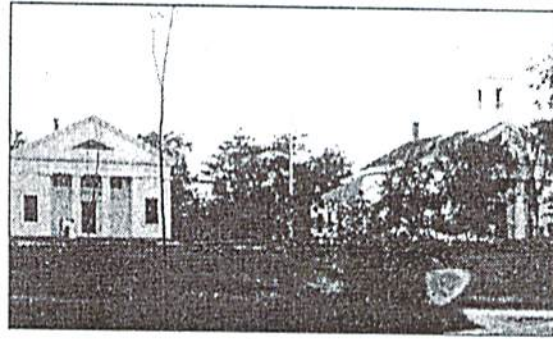


The first three meetinghouses of Duxbury were just that, meetinghouses where the whole town gathered not only for Town Meetings but for church services as well.

Duxbury's first meetinghouse stood next to the old burying ground on Chestnut Street for 68 years, from 1638-1706. By 1706 it was thought too small and needing too many repairs. The impending separation of the town of Pembroke and the dividing of the common lands of West Duxbury also fueled the wish for a new place to meet.

The second meetinghouse stood next to the site of the first one from 1707-1784. The building served for 77 years as a place for Town Meetings, but even by 1750 there was agitation to have a new one. In true municipal pace, it took thirty-four years to get one built. In the meantime, the emotional Town Meetings around the Revolution were held in this square plain building. Wooden benches with no backs were likely the seats in these the first two buildings, although pews were eventually put in the second building.

The third meetinghouse was built at a new site, now the site occupied by the First Parish church on Tremont Street. It was felt the Tremont Street site was more the geographic center of town. The building was a big square building with galleries of pews above the main floor. Three sides had belfry towers that included stairs to the upper gallery. Wooden seats that folded down were in the pews. This building lasted through 55 Town Meetings until the year 1840, but changes in town decided its fate.



Old Town Hall served as the location of Town Meetings for 87 years.

The first was the separation of church and state, which happened in Duxbury in 1828. The town as a whole stopped supporting one church, and congregations like the Methodists established themselves. The second issue was the booming wealth of Duxbury families that took place after the Revolution. Wealthy ship-building families felt the humble 18th century meetinghouse did not reflect the prosperity of the town, so a new church for the Unitarians was in order and a new building for Town Meetings was as well.

The Town House, or Old Town Hall as we call it now, is Duxbury's oldest and most venerable symbol of the power of Town Meeting. It was built in 1840 and saw its first town meeting in 1841 and its last in 1927, a record run of 87 years of Town Meetings. Voters sat

on long movable wooden benches, which made the Hall flexible for many other town events. It also saw the arrival of 9 women voters for the first time at the 1919 Town Meeting. Although the building itself is not large, with horse sheds in the rear and the broad sloping lawn out front, town meeting goers gathered outside no matter what the March weather to talk and gossip.

Another shift happened with the March 1928 town meeting. The new Duxbury High School welcomed town meeting goers to its gymnasium. This building, now the Duxbury Free Library, was the pride and joy of 1928 Duxbury and reflected a collaboration that continues to 2004 of the schools hosting town meetings. There was a slight delay at the beginning of the 1928 town meeting because some people out of habit went to the Old Town Hall for the meeting. A runner was quickly sent to fetch them and from then until 1961 this building served the annual town meetings. The elbow room in the new gym was considered great and the best feature was the basement lunch room of the school where lunch was served to voters by the Senior Class of 1928. Wooden stackable folding chairs for meeting goers helped to quickly convert the gym into a meeting hall.

1962 saw a new era of growth in Duxbury and the change of the annual town meeting that year to the spacious T. Waldo Herrick gym of the brand new Junior-Senior High School (now the Middle School) was welcomed by many. The cafeteria was noticeably brighter and bigger than the dim one in the basement of the school on the hill. During the planning of the new school the auditorium was reduced in size and so the gym and folding chairs continued to be the order of the day for town meeting goers. After the 1968 Middle School (now Duxbury High School) was built, the auditorium was often used for special Town Meetings but the gym of the current Middle School served for 41 annual meetings from 1962-2003.

We are now poised on the brink of another era with the Town Meeting being held in the spanking new Performing Arts Center. State of the art sound systems, a new cafeteria, and for Duxbury annual Town Meeting goers a first in almost 400 years: padded and hopefully comfortable seats for all, including capacity crowds. Let's hope the cushiony seats will keep voters in 2004 alert and as wise as their predecessors.